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Social website draws heavy traffic

By Daniel Gilbert

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In its first week at the University of Chicago, thefacebook.com has achieved rapid, widespread popularity among students, with some 1500 students registering in the first 75 hours. After one week, there are 2,380 students registered at the University, with 118,560 students registered throughout the United States, according to the website's founders.

Some students have wondered why The Facebook, which first opened to Harvard students on February 4, took so long to reach the University of Chicago. The three months it took for the website to arrive at the U of C has a further twist: Donna Zuckerberg, the younger sister Mark Zuckerberg, the creator of The Facebook, is a first-year in the College.

Donna Zuckerberg was present at The Facebook's conception, which happened on an evening over winter break, while she and her brother were discussing an article just issued from Harvard University. The article condemned a now defunct website constructed by Mark in the fall called "facemash.com." Administrators at Harvard stated that the Facemash site would cause a two-year delay in the University's own production of an online facebook. Donna recalled her brother's reaction: "That's ridiculous, I could do that in one night." "And he did," she added.

Many students familiar with similar websites such as Friendster and Livejournal prefer The Facebook for its combination of utility with a fun gimmick. Ethan Jewett, a third-year in the College, emphasized how the restriction of the website to one's university, as opposed to an abstract network of friends, is critical to the site's success.

"Building a network on thefacebook.com isn't creating a new community disjoint from your natural social community, it's creating a directory and a tool to help you navigate your flesh and blood social network," Jewett said. "While some students still engage in a popularity contest, the impulse is moderated since no one wants to look like they're desperate for friends in a place where their real friends will see them."

Other students mistrust the social network that The Facebook provides. Dmitri Sandbeck, a first-year in the College, has not registered a profile. "The Facebook feels far too impersonal in the way that it connects people, allowing you to claim as friends people who you barely even know, or who you have never talked to," Sandbeck said. "Also judging by the volume of e-mail my friends are getting, it's practically like signing up to receive more spam."

Many students view the popularity of The Facebook as a fad, soon to lose its novelty. Plotting social networks and amassing friends appear to be the first features with which students become disenchanted. Some students voiced complaints that others were posting profiles with false pictures and inaccurate information, yet no one has denied the potential utility of the website to keep in touch with friends from different schools, and to contact people in their classes at the University.

A first-year speaking on condition of anonymity noted that The Facebook is a lot about projecting a certain image. "You choose one picture, and certain books and movies to represent yourself, but do you choose the books you actually like, or do you choose what you want people to associate with you?" she asked. The student gave an example of how posting a profile has tangible repercussions with regard to her social life. "I'm currently having a fight with my boyfriend, because he doesn't like the picture I've posted," she said.

Students who decide that The Facebook is not for them have the option of deactivating themselves from the website. While numerous students have done this, The Facebook's press contact Chris Hughes said that he and his team are not keeping a record of how many students deactivate.

In the meantime, the founders appear to remain one step ahead of the game. The website's most recent feature, an option to list summer plans, allows students to

connect with others who will be near them during the summer, fostering additional opportunities for social networking.

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